



*Infusing Critical Thinking Skills in the English as a Foreign Language Classroom: A Meaningful Experience for Teachers and Students*

*Inspirando Habilidades de Pensamiento Crítico en el Aula de Inglés como Lengua Extranjera: Una Experiencia Significativa para Profesores y Estudiantes*

*Habilidades de pensamento crítico inspiradoras na sala de aula de inglês como língua estrangeira: uma experiência significativa para professores e alunos*

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## Abstract

Critical Thinking implies using strategies that engage individuals in complex thinking that demand analysis, judgment, construction, and reconstruction of knowledge to make the right decisions in a given situation. This paper highlights aspects of a research study conducted in an English as a Foreign Language Classroom that used the target language to promote Critical Thinking skills in college students. The study aimed to move from the narrow perspective of teaching a language for the sole reason of developing language skills to a broader conception that envisions language as a tool to infuse Critical Thinking. Throughout the study, the didactic activities raised awareness on the importance of integrating language and thinking skills simultaneously. This paper starts with an overview of major conceptualizations of Critical Thinking that fit the purposes of language teaching, followed by a description of the role of Critical Thinking in the EFL classroom. This paper also discusses important considerations when embracing Critical Thinking approach to teaching. Lastly, best didactic practices that proved to be effective to spark Critical Thinking skills in college students are presented. This paper emphasizes that the appropriate implementation of Critical Thinking strategies constitutes a meaningful learning experience for both teachers and learners. This document also suggests that language competence and criticality are complementary rather than antipodal. Recommendations are that teachers should exploit the myriad of advantages that Critical Thinking strategies bring to the EFL classroom.

**Keywords:** Critical Thinking; language; language competence; strategies; skills; English as a Foreign Language classroom.

## Resumen

El Pensamiento Crítico implica el uso de estrategias que exigen a los individuos usar pensamiento complejo que implica análisis, juicio, construcción y reconstrucción del conocimiento para tomar decisiones correctas en una situación dada. Este documento destaca aspectos provenientes de un estudio de investigación realizado en un aula de Inglés como lengua extranjera que utilizó el idioma objetivo para promover habilidades de pensamiento crítico en estudiantes universitarios. El estudio tuvo como objetivo superar la perspectiva de enseñar un idioma con el único propósito de desarrollar habilidades lingüísticas a una concepción más amplia que visualiza el uso del idioma como una herramienta para infundir el Pensamiento Crítico. A lo largo del estudio, las actividades didácticas sensibilizaron a los participantes sobre la importancia de integrar el desarrollo del

idioma y las habilidades de pensamiento simultáneamente. Este artículo comienza con una descripción general de las principales conceptualizaciones del pensamiento crítico que se ajustan a los propósitos de la enseñanza de idiomas, seguido de una descripción del papel del pensamiento crítico en el aula de Inglés como lengua extranjera. Este documento también analiza consideraciones importantes al adoptar el enfoque de pensamiento crítico para la enseñanza. Por último, se presentan las mejores prácticas didácticas que demostraron ser efectivas para despertar las habilidades de Pensamiento Crítico en estudiantes universitarios. Este documento enfatiza que la implementación apropiada de las estrategias del Pensamiento Crítico constituye una experiencia de aprendizaje significativa tanto para los profesores como para los alumnos. Este documento también sugiere que la competencia lingüística y la criticidad son complementarias más que antípodas. Las recomendaciones se orientan a animar a los maestros a aprovechar las ventajas que las estrategias de pensamiento crítico aportan al aula de Inglés como lengua extranjera.

**Palabras Clave:** Pensamiento Crítico; idioma; competencia lingüística; estrategias; habilidades; aula de Inglés como lengua extranjera.

## Resumo

O pensamento crítico envolve o uso de estratégias que requerem que os indivíduos usem um pensamento complexo que envolve análise, julgamento, construção e reconstrução do conhecimento para tomar decisões corretas em uma determinada situação. Este documento destaca aspectos de uma pesquisa conduzida em uma sala de aula de inglês como língua estrangeira que usou a língua-alvo para promover habilidades de pensamento crítico em estudantes universitários. O estudo teve como objetivo ir além da perspectiva de ensino de uma língua com o único propósito de desenvolver habilidades linguísticas para uma concepção mais ampla que visualiza o uso da língua como ferramenta para infundir o Pensamento Crítico. Ao longo do estudo, atividades didáticas sensibilizaram os participantes para a importância de integrar o desenvolvimento da linguagem e as habilidades de pensamento simultaneamente. Este artigo começa com uma visão geral das principais conceituações de pensamento crítico que se enquadram nos propósitos do ensino de línguas, seguido por uma descrição do papel do pensamento crítico na sala de aula de inglês como língua estrangeira. Este documento também discute considerações importantes ao adotar a abordagem de pensamento crítico para o ensino. Por fim, são apresentadas as melhores

práticas didáticas que se mostraram eficazes no despertar de habilidades de Pensamento Crítico em estudantes universitários. Este documento enfatiza que a implementação adequada de estratégias de pensamento crítico constitui uma experiência de aprendizagem significativa para professores e alunos. Este artigo também sugere que a competência linguística e a criticidade são complementares, e não antípodas. As recomendações têm como objetivo incentivar os professores a aproveitarem os benefícios que as estratégias de pensamento crítico trazem para a sala de aula de inglês como língua estrangeira.

**Palavras-chave:** Pensamento crítico; idioma; competência linguística; estratégias; Habilidades; sala de aula de inglês como língua estrangeira.

## Introduction

The Learning of English as a foreign language (EFL) is mandatory at all educational levels in Ecuador. According to the Ministry of Education, students are obliged to study English as part of their curricula from second grade (MEC, 2014). The importance of learning English from an early age is justified because of the increase of professional and academic demands in a globalized world where the chances of getting a well-paid job, accessing updated information, and doing research are manifold for people who master this language (Nishanthi, 2018). Given the increasing pressure to become proficient in English, teachers have realized the necessity of developing students' language skills and Critical Thinking skills. This necessity has urged teachers to make significant transformations in how they perceive and enact their teaching (Lipman, 1991; Maiorana, 1992).

The last two decades have seen substantial improvements in the study of Critical Thinking (Behar-Horenstein & Niu, 2011; Browne, 2006; Ennis, 1995; Fisher, 2001). Reasons behind the interest in developing Critical Thinking are that it is indispensable for individuals, especially those in higher education, to solve problems, defend their new ideas, question information, become independent learners, and think beyond facts (Benesh, 2001; Curtis, 2003). Developing Critical Thinking skills in college students should not be exclusive in classrooms where theoretical, philosophical, or hard sciences are taught. On the contrary, fostering Critical Thinking should be a collective enterprise for all subjects.

The specific characteristics of the English as a foreign language classroom make it the ideal environment where teachers can foster Critical Thinking (Pineda, 2004). Unfortunately, teachers often give more weight to vocabulary, grammar, and language skill training. We believe that

teachers' and students' endeavors in the EFL classroom should strive to stimulate students to use the language productively, so they can debate, analyze, criticize, evaluate, create, judge, and reverse their thinking. Activities should also support students in their quest to use their previous knowledge to underpin new understanding. In this view, EFL needs to take a more dynamic and purposeful perspective rather than a simple task of skill acquisition. This paper draws on the importance of developing Critical Thinking skills in the EFL classroom and provides valuable, constructive details on conceptualizations, usefulness, and strategies to achieve this goal.

### **Definition of Critical Thinking**

Multiple definitions for Critical Thinking have been provided throughout the years. It is worth mentioning that reaching a consensus on a standard definition of Critical Thinking is unfeasible. Throughout the years, the definition of this construct has evolved according to specific conditions and contexts. This characteristic makes Critical Thinking a malleable and prolific field in terms of definitions, applications, methods, and research. Definitions guiding this study attend to the contributions that apply to Critical Thinking in EFL contexts.

Paul, 1991 provided an initial definition for Critical Thinking. Paul stated that Critical Thinking is the intellectually disciplined process of actively conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating information generated by observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, and communication. From this standpoint, Critical Thinking becomes a guide to knowledge and action. Paul, 1991 believes that Critical Thinking is based on intellectual values that transcend the sciences' divisions to explain phenomena with clarity, precision, consistency, relevance, evidence, reasoning, depth, and fairness. Also, Critical Thinking implies the competence individuals possess to examine structures and elements of thought implicit in various purposes that involve logic, problem-solving, conceptualizing, analyzing consequences and implications, assessing points of view, and creating frames of reference. Critical Thinking also adapts itself to giving answers to various questions and purposes by creating a network of thought. Ennis, 1995 defined Critical Thinking as "reasonably reflective thinking focuses on deciding what to believe or do." Critical Thinking encourages individuals to learn how to evaluate situations, draw inferences, and arrive at conclusions based on the evidence they get from the reality around them. Hatcher, 2000 asserted that Critical Thinking is that sort of thought that intends to reach the

judgment of an issue only after evaluating all the alternatives, arguments, and available evidence related to a fact. Fisher, 2001 cited that Critical Thinking implies building knowledge actively, persistently, and carefully in the light of foundations that underpin further conclusions.

The definitions above generate assumptions with substantial implications for the teaching and learning of a foreign language. EFL teachers using Critical Thinking in their classrooms encourage students to engage in an active process that involves several phases, resulting in new and meaningful knowledge. Indeed, students can apply Critical Thinking strategies to content in any field of expertise. However, when learning a new language, essential thinking applications are manifold since language is the means to communicate and convey information. In this sense, EFL students can use Critical Thinking to elaborate on the contents presented in class, comment, question, analyze, evaluate, create, modify, reframe, or relate information. Thus, teaching a foreign language can undoubtedly benefit from Critical Thinking principles by including activities that require students to challenge themselves and activities that require deep reasoning and creativity.

### **Critical Thinking in the English as a Foreign Language Classroom**

There is no doubt that Critical Thinking is crucial in all fields (Changwong, Sukkamart, & Sisan, 2018; Heard, Scoular, Duckworth, & Ramalingam, 2020; Nazir, 2010; Santos, 2017). However, its role is significant in those disciplines where language is used to communicate ideas. When people are using language, they are not just putting together parts of speech but demonstrating their thinking. The potential foreign language learners exhibit to organize their ideas in a language that is not theirs implies using various Critical Thinking skills that teachers should benefit. Unfortunately, English as a foreign language teaching has traditionally given too much importance to the development of language knowledge (vocabulary and grammar) and skills (reading, listening, speaking, writing) while neglecting the cultivation of students' Critical Thinking. This is mainly because teachers erroneously believe that students cannot use their Critical Thinking skills until they have mastered the new language. In other words, teachers believe that language competence compares with cognitive ability.

Consequently, teachers give students low order thinking skills tasks such as multiple-choice exercises, close-ended questions, and repetition drills. Accordingly, students are given little or no opportunity to "experience" language. This teaching approach results in making classes too elementary, dull for teachers and students, and stagnating in meaningful learning.

As previously indicated, all students, no matter their field of study, need to expand their Critical Thinking skills. However, this expansion is not the result of random sporadic exposure. On the contrary, students should be given planned and frequent opportunities to exercise and develop their thinking skills, specially those of higher thought levels. Critical Thinking can broaden EFL students' perspectives and horizons not only in the use of language but also in how they conceive the world around them when using the target language. Foreign language learners who have been trained in Critical Thinking skills are self-confident when expressing themselves and use language creatively to use relevant information, reason coherently, and come to consistent and reliable conclusions. Therefore, it is highly recommended that EFL teachers initiate their students in developing Critical Thinking skills at the early stages of language development if they want to achieve higher language performance goals in the short term.

Critical Thinking skills are not innate in humans but learned. More exposure to essential tasks of thinking results in the improvement of abilities and resources that students can use in various contexts and circumstances. As a learned ability, Critical Thinking can be taught and practiced at any phase of the EFL session, from presentation to practice and production as well as for assignments, term papers, and examinations (Qing, 2013).

### **Practical Considerations when Adopting a Critical Thinking Approach to the Teaching of English**

A first consideration for EFL teachers who want to adopt Critical Thinking as an approach to teaching is identifying students' interests. Highly experienced teachers acknowledge that attending to students' interests results in a better engagement and motivation to learning (Domenech & Gomez-Artiga, 2011, Harackiewicz, Smith, & Priniski, 2016). The authors contend that interest is crucial to academic success. Some strategies to spark interest and promote motivation include generating and retaining students' curiosity with activities that spark their attention. Activities such as presenting problems, posing challenging situations and creating stunning settings are infinite sources to interest in students. Another source of interest is when teachers build on students' previous knowledge and experiences. Content and tasks that connect with previously existing information facilitate Critical Thinking skills since students can establish connections between what is being presented and what they already know (Heard et al., 2020).

The teacher's role is another fundamental consideration to the development of Critical Thinking skills in EFL students. Teachers need to constantly nurture and encourage students to be critical thinkers while working with the target language. Teachers should consider that learning a new language involves students spending a tremendous amount of energy to deal with their pre-existing language and the accommodations they must arrange to process the new language (Akbari, 2015; Banks, 2008 ). However, it is not only language issues that EFL students must sort out when learning. It is also the fear they might feel to take significant risks with the formation of ideas. Students can feel anxiety and therefore feel shy and hesitant to express their thoughts when asked for their opinions. A learning environment where students feel respected, appreciated, comfortable and secure is essential. Teachers supporting students to think critically should understand that when students start thinking "outside the box", they need to feel safe from negative judgment. Thus, teachers promoting a non-threatening classroom atmosphere where students feel supported to express their opinions is an essential requirement to encourage Critical Thinking in EFL students.

### **Practical Critical Thinking Tasks in the EFL Classroom**

This paper is based on a study carried out by the researcher with a group of college students who enhanced their language skills while using their Critical Thinking skills. Observations of English classes and students' opinions throughout one semester led to selecting practical Critical Thinking activities teachers can use in their sessions. However, it is noteworthy to mention that infusing Critical Thinking is not a short but a long-term process. Teachers can start with simple activities and progress towards more challenging ones such as problem solving. Working with college students poses several advantages for teachers since students have already acquainted a significant amount of experience at this level. Teachers can draw from that experience to create situations where students can reveal their potential as critical thinkers.

According to the students who participated in the study, we present a few of the most practical activities that motivated and sparked their Critical Thinking.

- Debates and classroom discussions: Providing students with controversial topics to defend their position is one of the practical activities that students found as supporting their Critical Thinking development. Although students might feel anxious at the beginning, they eventually respond favorably as the classes progress over time. Akerman and Neale (2011)



acknowledged the importance of the debate in the classroom, stating that by presenting two sets of perspectives to students and encouraging them to support their position in an oral or written exchange, students can demonstrate their abilities as critical thinkers. Presenting controversial topics generates high judgment, analysis, scrutiny, and reflection; all of them are compatible with Critical Thinking purposes.

- **Posing questions:** Questioning was the second most helpful strategy that students found engaging and thought-provoking. Appropriate questioning is, however, crucial when using this strategy to develop Critical Thinking. Oftentimes, teachers rely heavily on questions to check for understanding. Although these questions are sometimes necessary, they do not demand deep thinking. The overuse of these questions can lead to students' disengagement and boredom. Teachers must be very mindful when designing questions. Appropriate questions are those that match both students' language and thinking levels. Posing unrealistically demanding questions may result in students losing their self-confidence and interest (Long, Blankenburg, & Butani, 2015). A good practice to facilitate questioning in the EFL classroom is to design questions in a sequence. The sequence will help students to think deeper and deeper as they come through in the progression.
- **Meaningful written assignments:** involving students in writing is not an easy task since it implies the combination of several sub-components that need to be logically organized. To reduce the anxiety students may experience when dealing with written assignments, teachers can devise meaningful tasks for students, by giving students meaningful written assignments, we mean to provide them with a genuine reason to write. The task must be relevant to lives and the context where they perform their daily activities. The task should also be closely connected to their objectives as learners. As a rule of thumb, Critical Thinking writing tasks should be short but meaningful and should hopefully come right after the lesson to immediately relate to what they learned in class. Asking students to write long essays or elaborated reports does not guarantee that students will be using their Critical Thinking skills but other people's ideas. As a preparation for the writing task, teachers can ask students to discuss their ideas in groups. These discussions will enrich students' thinking on the topic and will help them to guide their writing.

### **Challenges to the Inclusion of Critical Thinking in the EFL Classroom**

The study identified a few challenges to the application of Critical Thinking strategies in the EFL classroom. Student's initial reaction to the approach was the first challenge identified from the beginning of the study. EFL students feel very comfortable when working with linguistic elements exclusively. They tend to focus more on linguistic aspects because they believe that once they master them, they will become proficient users of the language. Working on tasks that do not imply the mechanical application of the rule or retrieving words from memory can be very frustrating to students, especially to those who feel that their linguistic abilities are not strong enough to develop Critical Thinking tasks.

Another challenge to the implementation of Critical Thinking approach is the time constraint that teachers face. Completing the course syllabus with all the contents, activities, assignments, and tests becomes an issue for teachers. Critical Thinking demands time. Asking students to analyze, criticize, evaluate, or create will require teachers to circumvent contents or go beyond the textbook. Some institutions believe that following the syllabus is necessary to achieve the course goals. Therefore, leaving out contents might cause problems with other teachers and stakeholders.

A final caveat identified along the study was the number of students. Critical Thinking activities demand more personalized instruction. Often, teachers need to work with students individually to guide them through their reflections. The study's experience suggested that because of the nature of the strategies recommended by Critical Thinking approach to foreign language teaching, small classrooms with twenty or twenty-five students would be advisable.

### **Conclusions**

As in any other field, English as foreign language teachers are compelled to foster Critical Thinking skills in their students no matter their level of language proficiency. There are no evident limitations for teachers to prevent their students from exercising deep thinking in the English as a foreign classroom. In fact, studying a foreign language makes the perfect environment to develop thinking skills since it is at the school where students use all the communicative potential to make meaning of their thoughts.

After a deep reflection of the implementation of Critical Thinking strategies with a group of college students, we can conclude that using these strategies resulted in students' positive outcomes. Throughout the sessions, students displayed higher levels of engagement and a better disposition

to work with language. They also demonstrated that by exercising their thinking skills such as creating, judging, analyzing, reflecting, discussing, proposing, answering, and assessing, they could perform with language at a better level. Participants in this study described learning English from Critical Thinking standpoint was a significant and valuable experience that changed their perspectives regarding the implications of learning a foreign language.

The role of the English as a foreign language teacher in promoting Critical Thinking in their classrooms is crucial. It is their responsibility to prepare their students with the tools they need to confront the job market rigors. Teachers need to encourage their students to use all their potential to perform at their great capacity. As agents of change, English as a foreign language teachers need to look for innovative strategies to help their students use their Critical Thinking skills. As a teacher and researcher, embarking in this study is a lifelong learning experience that brought significant personal and professional satisfaction.

As a final word, research in different contexts suggests that students exposed to Critical Thinking activities in their classrooms can benefit from a curricula that underpinnes in the principles of developing such skills that will help them perform at their total capacity in the future. Students who have exercised Critical Thinking in their classrooms can extrapolate those skills to any future arena, making them more competitive and efficient. Critical thinkers can certainly use their abilities to satisfy the demands of a society in constant change that expects individuals to contribute with innovative solutions to the myriad of problems of the modern world. Although becoming a critical thinker is not straightforward, it is definitely a path all teachers should be willing to embark.

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